

The Return

By Jack Ritchie

I was struck by lightning on August 27, 1754.

It had been a rather cloudy day on Manhattan Island to begin with, but I had not expected rain, much less lightning, and so I had embarked on my daily constitutional, a habit which I had formed early in life.

I had begun my return and was perhaps two hundred yards from my home when rain came pelting down and lightning flashed, sending pedestrians helter-skelter in search of havens. I myself made for the shelter of a huge oak tree, not a wise measure I will admit, however in those days we did not know that taking refuge under a tree is the very last thing one should do when one is caught in a thunderstorm.

I reached the tree and stood under it glowering at the downpour, when instant blackness descended upon me. It was the moment when the lightning struck, though I did not actually see or feel the bolt itself.

When I regained consciousness I found myself in my own bed with my good wife, Thelma, hovering over me anxiously.

I blinked and asked the inevitable question. "What happened?"

"You were struck by lightning, dear," Thelma said. "Luckily you were recognized and carried home."

Naturally I immediately tested the mobility of my limbs and even went to a mirror. It was with considerable relief that I discovered that I had escaped the lightning unscathed. Or so I thought at the time.

I was thirty-two years old and engaged in the shipping trade, being part owner of several sailing vessels, and prospering. I had married Thelma ten years previously — a marriage arranged by my parents.

Thelma was a fine woman — virtuous, loyal, hard-working — and I was rather

content, even though it appeared that we would never be blessed with children.

As I said, I thought that I had escaped the lightning bolt unchanged. I did not begin to suspect that this might not be the case until many years later.

It was my mirror which gave me the first inkling. When I gazed into it, I had for long congratulated myself on my apparent good fortune in being able to retain my youthful countenance.

At first my wife shared my view, commenting to all who would listen that "Henry carries the years well."

However, after a time, there was less and less of this, and it became evident that she was actually beginning to *resent* my youthful appearance.

We had been married some twenty-five years when Thelma's hair began to gray. My own did not. Nor did my face or my body show any signs of aging.

But this was not true of Thelma. When she reached the age of forty, she *looked* forty. And I still seemed to be thirty-two, even though chronologically I was four years older than she.

And eventually Thelma developed a dislike of being seen with me in public, since comparisons of our aging seemed inevitable. Even my friends began to look at me with some awe, and some doubts.

I had hoped to glide into old age relatively happy, but it now became obvious that this was not to be. Thelma had become silent, brooding and even fearful of my very presence. In our private life, she had taken to avoiding me as much as possible.

Inevitably, in 1784, I came to the conclusion that I must do something about the situation. Something drastic. Thelma was becoming every day more morose and I even had fears that she might relapse into

madness.

And so I secretly converted half of my estate into gold — in those days proper wives did not pry into the extent of their husbands' incomes or estates — leaving the other half of my assets to Thelma, which would enable her to live well and comfortably for the rest of her life.

I then wrote a note to the effect that I had discovered that I had an incurable illness and that I had therefore decided to take the dignified way out of this life by drowning myself in the Atlantic Ocean.

After leaving that communication on the desk in my study, and disguising myself to some extent, I then walked down to the quay where I had booked passage on a sloop leaving the island the tide.

The vessel took me to Philadelphia, where I knew no one, and no one knew me.

I had, at that time, entertained no intimations of immortality. I assumed that it was merely my *appearance* which did not age. I still fully expected to be limited to a normal span of years and to die as any other mortal. Since I was then actually sixty-two, I did not think that my demise lay too many years ahead.

However, to keep myself busy until that time — and living under an assumed name — I made a variety of investments and again I prospered.

The years passed. Five of them. And then I was introduced to Clarissa Davenport at the none of one of my business acquaintances.

Clarissa was a quite comely young woman and it soon became apparent that she was attracted to me. And I, on my part, found myself reciprocating the interest, though a bit hesitantly.

After all, I was now sixty-seven and she nineteen. A point which seemed irreconcilable.

However, after much thought, I came to the conclusion that while I was actually

sixty-seven, I really looked and *felt* thirty-two. And further, in a few short years I would undoubtedly go to my maker and Clarissa would never face the problem which had made Thelma so unhappy.

After a short courtship, Clarissa and I were married in the summer of 1789.

the years passed without undue incident or travail, though we had no children, a misfortune which I attributed either to my chronological age, or possibly that lightning bolt.

In 1822 I reached my one hundredth birthday and Clarissa observed her fifty-second. Her hair was no longer auburn and she had taken to staring at me and brooding and wondering.

So once again I was faced with an unfortunate situation for which there was only one solution. I transferred half of my assets to portable cash and left the other half to Clarissa.

This time I drowned myself in the Delaware River, or ostensibly so, and took a vessel to New Orleans, when I established a new identity and made some judicious investments.

It was there that I came to the decision that I would never marry again. I suppose I am somewhat old-fashioned — even to this day — but I do rather regard marriage as a permanent arrangement which should not be trifled with.

I had already had two wives, and I thought that was quite enough. I did not want to add to the congestion which I might find in the afterlife, should I ever experience it.

This is not to say that I eschewed feminine companionship. After all, I was human and it was New Orleans. The question of marriage was never again seriously considered.

However, even without marriage, it still remained that I could remain in one area of the country for only a limited time. Some

twenty-five to thirty years. At that point one's acquaintances, male and female, would begin to stare at one and ask the secret of one's youth. Sometimes with suspicion.

Therefore in 1850, at the age of one-hundred and twenty-eight, I regretfully drowned myself in the Mississippi River and took my money to Boston where I established myself in a number of businesses, chiefly manufacturing.

At the onset of the Civil War, at the age of 139, I patriotically raised a regiment of volunteers for the North and was elected its colonel (I had avoided military service in the American Revolution because I had considered myself, at the time, too old for that sort of thing. Which may have been just as well, since my sympathies had been with the British.).

Feeling a certain immunity to death, I must admit that I enthusiastically played the role of a dashing, intrepid officer — at least until the battle of Gettysburg, in which I was seriously wounded.

Lying on my hospital bed, I then grappled with the possibility that while I had a certain immortality as far as aging was concerned, this immortality might not extend across the board. In other words, I might not be invulnerable to death by accident, disease, and, especially, on the battlefield.

Therefore when I returned to my troops, I exercised a good deal more caution and was more than relieved when the war ended. I never volunteered for another war again.

I returned to Boston in 1865, leaving there again in 1881 — meeting my demise in Quincy Bay — and then went west to Chicago.

By that time I had achieved enough financial security so that I no longer needed to actively pursue the business of making money. Therefore I devoted my subsequent

lives to other things. I have been in turn a physician, an atomic physicist, and a civil rights lawyer. I have also drowned myself in Lake Michigan, San Francisco Bay, and the Puget Sound.

In 1980 — at the age of 258 — I returned east to my point of origin, Manhattan Island. I established myself comfortably in a luxury apartment and as I gazed down at the city I began to wonder where in this crowded metropolis that old oak tree had originally stood.

Undoubtedly the spot was now under some towering office or apartment building, but still, where was it? I decided to make a project of finding out.

It took me longer than I had anticipated. As a matter of fact I spent nearly two years in dusty archives before I finally traced it down. And I was a bit surprised to find that it was in one of those vest-pocket squares one finds in the city where office workers from the surrounding buildings eat their bag lunches on warm summer days.

When I sat down on a bench — which I had calculated my be the precise site of the old oak tree — I found myself filled with a certain contentment — as though I had returned home after a long journey.

It was there I met Amantha O'Reilly.

She carried a brown paper bag, hesitating for a moment when she saw me, and then sat down on the far end of the bench. She had violet eyes and I guessed her age at about twenty-seven or twenty-eight.

She unwrapped a sandwich — I made it out to be tuna — and at that point, our eyes met. She quickly looked away.

But that slight eye contact had been more than enough. I was smitten. I spoke. "Do you come here often?"

She looked at me again and decided to nod. "Yes. Whenever the weather is nice."

We began conversation and I discovered that she was an executive in a petroleum company headquartered in Manhattan. One

does not ordinarily expect executives to pack bag lunches, but she assured me that come of them do.

I saw her again the next day. And the next. And I could see that she was attracted to me, too. After all, what she saw was a presentable well-dressed man of thirty two.

I dismissed all thoughts of a mere liaison. No, this was a much more serious business of the heart. I would marry her.

But it would be an honest, total commitment. For about twenty years. And then — while there was still a bloom on our marriage — I would honorably die again. However *this* time, the death would be genuine and irrevocable. I would, in truth, drown myself in the Long Island Sound. Or possibly the East River, if it were cleaned up a bit.

After two weeks of meeting on the bench, I finally asked Amantha to marry me.

She stared at me for a few moments and

then looked away. "No, I can't."

It now occurred to me that I had taken it for granted that she was single. "Are you married?"

"I was. Twice." She sighed heavily. "Henry, I'm going to be absolutely frank with you. I suppose you'll think that I've lost my mind, but I've got to tell you."

Her eyes hazed as she looked back in time. "It happened on August 27, 1754. It was raining and there was a lot of thunder and lightning. I remember running for the shelter of a large oak tree. It stood on this very spot. There was a man already under the tree, his back toward me. And then there was blackness. I had been struck by lightning and when I regained consciousness I was being carried home."

I smiled. When she finished telling her story, I would tell her mine.

Yes indeed, this was going to be one *long, long* marriage. ◆